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News Release



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CRITICAL HABITAT RE-PROPOSED FOR COASTAL CALIFORNIA GNATCATCHER

A new proposal to designate critical habitat for the coastal California gnatcatcher (*Poliophtila californica californica*) was announced today by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Once a common resident of southern California, the California gnatcatcher has experienced a significant population decline triggered by the loss and degradation of its native coastal sage scrub habitat.

Critical habitat is being proposed on approximately 495,795 acres of land in portions of Ventura, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and San Diego counties. Areas proposed as critical habitat are identified in 13 separate units. They include a mixture of Federal, State, local, and privately owned land.

Today's announcement is the result of legal challenges regarding the Service's Oct. 24, 2000 designation of critical habitat for the coastal California gnatcatcher, and the associated economic analysis. In response to the lawsuits, the U.S. District Court for the Central District of California granted the Service's request to re-propose critical habitat and to prepare a new economic analysis.

A draft economic analysis of this proposed critical habitat designation is being prepared by Economic & Planning Systems, Inc. (EPS), under subcontract to Industrial Economics, Inc. (IEc), for the Service's Division of Economics. It will be made available for public review and comment.

The Service considered but is not proposing to designate critical habitat on lands within the boundaries of approved Habitat Conservation Plans that include the coastal California gnatcatcher as a covered species, Tribal lands of the Pala Band of Mission Indians, or lands on the Marine Corps Air Station at Miramar that are covered by an Integrated Natural Resource Management Plan.

"We relied on the cumulative scientific information and data available, including habitat modeling, to identify lands that contain the habitat characteristics necessary for the conservation of the coastal California gnatcatcher", said Steve Thompson, Manager of the Service's California/Nevada Operations Office.

According to Thompson, "in light of national security interests, the Service is not proposing critical habitat on mission-essential training areas on the Marine Corps Base at Camp Pendleton."

Maps showing lands essential to the conservation of the coastal California gnatcatcher within mission-essential training areas on Camp Pendleton, Tribal lands, and reserve lands within the boundaries of the San Diego County Multiple Species Conservation Program and the Orange County Central-Coastal Natural Communities Conservation Program are available for public review and comment on the Service's Web site at <http://carlsbad.fws.gov>.

Critical habitat is being proposed on some non-training areas at Camp Pendleton and on lands leased to the State or private entities by the Marine Corps.

Critical habitat refers to specific geographic areas that are essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and that may require special management consideration or protection. A critical habitat designation on private land will have no impact on private landowner activities that do not require Federal funding or permits. Such a designation is applicable only to Federal activities.

The Service is also addressing the ongoing scientific debate concerning the identification of the coastal California gnatcatcher subspecies. In 2000, Roger Zink, George Barrowclough, Jonathan Atwood, and Rachelle Blackwell-Rago published the results of genetic research on the California gnatcatcher based on mitochondrial DNA analysis, which concluded that the coastal California gnatcatcher may not be a valid subspecies.

The Service is now considering whether to retain the designation of the coastal California gnatcatcher as a subspecies or to list the entire U.S. population of the California gnatcatcher species as threatened. Currently, the coastal California gnatcatcher subspecies is recognized by the American Ornithologists' Union.

A complete description of the proposed rule to designate critical habitat for the coastal California gnatcatcher was published in the Federal Register on April 24, 2003. Written comments on the proposed rule should be submitted to the Field Supervisor, Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office, 6010 Hidden Valley Road, Carlsbad, California 92009. Comments will be accepted until 5:00 p.m. on June 23, 2003. Requests for a public hearing must be submitted in writing to the above address no later than 5:00 p.m. on June 9, 2003. A separate announcement will be made when the draft economic analysis is released to the public.

Comments may also be submitted by electronic mail to fw1cfwocagn@r1.fws.gov. Please submit electronic comments as an ASCII file and avoid the use of special characters or encryption. Please include "Attn: RIN-1018-AI72" in your subject header and your name and return address in the body of your electronic message. If you do not receive a confirmation from the system that we received your message, please contact the Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office at 760/431-9440.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 540 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing

and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

*For more information, visit the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
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